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President's News Conference on Foreign and Domestic Matters

Following is a transcript of President Reagan's news conference in Washington last night, as recorded by The New York Times:

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Debate Material

Q. Regarding the Carter debate material obtained by your 1980 campaign organization, do you think it was right or wrong to keep this material, to use it for your advantage, and also do you think it's O.K. to keep someone on your staff who did indeed handle this material?

A. Well now, Jim, to try to answer your several questions there, first of all, I never knew until you people made it public in the press a few days ago that there ever had been such material in possession of any people in our campaign organization. I never saw anything of the kind, and as I recall the debate, I don't recall any particular use that could have been made of anything of that kind because having found the papers they must have been referring to that some of our people do recall seeing, there wasn't anything of campaign strategy in those. They were the type of thing that would be I think in any campaign — positions that they would take on my positions, their achievements and what they thought their Administration had achieved. We probably had literature of the same kind on our side.

But everything that was used in that debate had been used over and over again out on the campaign trail. And I'd like to call to your attention also that the two contestants do not set the tone of the debate or the agenda. The four journalists that asked the questions are the ones that determine what you're going to talk about. And unless they had some material in advance, we answered the questions that they asked.

Now, the other thing is that in an effort to get at this you ask about right or wrong, we have turned over everything that we have been able to find that we had to the Justice Department and here, as you all I think have seen and are going to see if you haven't, almost two full pages, is everything that we could find with the time at which it was turned over to the Justice Depart-

ment with my request that they monitor this very carefully and if they find that there was any incidence of wrongdoing on the part of anyone in our organization — or anyone in the Carter organization — then take whatever action is appropriate.

But to get to the bottom of this, because no one ever, it seems strange to me that since I was the debater, no one on our side ever mentioned to me anything of this kind, or that they had anything, or told me any of the things that supposedly were in there.

As a matter of fact, some of the things that were said there were all my own.

Q. Was it right to have this material back then at that time or should your people have followed the example known about in another case where this material came into someone's possession and was returned unopened: We don't want it, send it back. Should that have been the way this was handled or was it proper to look at this material even having received it?

A. Well, I don't know that it came in any kind of a cover or anything to denote what it was. As I've said, we've asked the Justice Department to find out if there was anything improper going on or anything that was illegal in any way or any wrongdoing and take whatever action is necessary. But since it never got to the debater, what purpose did it serve?

Ethical Implications

Q. Mr. President, I'd like to try that right-and-wrong question once again, just to see how you evaluate this. Do you see these questions about the Carter briefing book as important, really important, possessing ethical implications? Or do you see this merely as a highly political effort by the Democrats? One that you find you must address simply because it has political implications?

A. Godfrey, how could you think that there was anything political in this? I happen to agree with House Speaker Tip O'Neill, who said today that he didn't think the debate would have turned out any differently one way or the other, and they thought the thing ought to go away and he didn't think there ought to be a Congressional investigation of it. I found he was speaking with words of profound wisdom.

Q. Just as a matter of curiosity and followup — have you called Mr. Casey in and asked him what he may know about all this? Anything?

A. We've all talked about this, and we evidently had a stack of papers that has gone over to the Justice Department that are available for anyone, that were passed — and anyone who has been around a campaign knows the reams of paper, the reams of proposals and plans that come in to you — that were passed over, and I can understand his very well not having paid any attention. He wasn't going to wade through a stack of papers. They didn't come in a binder or a cover or anything. And, as I say, evidently the book that is now being peddled to many of you is not what was in our possession. No one that we've talked to that said that they saw these papers at one time or other, none of them say they ever saw that book that is the strategy book.

CONTINUED

Q. Mr. President, what was in the possession of former campaign officials who now work in this Administration was over 500 pages of various materials, including some that were clearly strategic. Some that gave very specific information. One memo came from some Carter staff members who were brainstorming about the debate. And I get back to the question of what do you think about the ethics. Your press spokesman has said that this is nothing new in politics. Would you condone this? Do you condone this in the campaign that you ran? And would you condone it in a future campaign that you might run?

A. No. And it's never been characteristic of any campaigns that I've been in. And again I repeat, I had never heard anything about this until you all started talking about it. And so obviously it was never passed to me for any use in a campaign.

But the thing is that I want the Justice Department to determine. I know many have carelessly used a term that did someone steal something from the White House. I'd suggest that anyone that would try that's pretty foolish.

But I think it should be determined — was there a disgruntled worker in the Carter campaign who did something of that kind? But find out who's — who did what. And if it was improper or illegal, then take action.

Q. Mr. President, to follow, even if

A. Everybody's following up here.

Q. Even if it was not illegal, how do you feel about the ethics of it? And how do you feel about the fact that of all the participants, your C.I.A. Director is the only one who had absolutely no recollection, yet he was the man in charge, he was the campaign manager?

A. Which is why he'd be the fella that would pass it on as quickly as he got it. I do that with some papers sometimes, too, now. I don't look, but I know that they could be handled by someone else.

Q. The ethical question?

A. What?

Q. The ethical question, sir.

A. The ethical question? I think that campaigning has always in the eyes of the people had a kind of a double standard. And I have deplored it. And that is that people have said — people that are otherwise totally honest — have said when they hear about something, they've said, oh, well, you know: politics.

Well, I don't happen to believe politics should have a double standard. No, I think it should be above reproach. And there shouldn't be unethical things done in campaigns. Even such things as accusing the other candidate of being a racist and things like that.

Action on Aides

Q. Mr. President, even though there shouldn't be a double standard, your Chief of Staff, Mr. Baker, says he had this material and knew it was obtained from the Carter camp. He doesn't know how. Mr. Stockman, who helped prepare you for the debate, said he used the material and found it useful. Do you intend to reprimand them, or some other way correct them?

A. No. The stuff they had again was not what is in this final book. It was not campaign strategy. And most of everything that I've heard that they found in those papers are the positions that were already public in the campaign. They were the kind of things that I had, where staff would tell me — here's a list of the things you accomplished as Governor; here are the things that you should be talking about. And it was this type of thing, and I think what Dave Stockman meant, although he can speak for himself, is that Dave meant that since he was going to play President Carter in practicing in front of a panel of questioners — that it saved him having to go out and dig up what were all of the accomplishments of the Carter Administration.

Q. Sir, if I may? Does it matter if it was stolen whether it was sensitive or not?

A. Is it stolen if someone hands it to you — if some disgruntled individual hands to another counterpart in a campaign organization. We don't know how it was obtained.

Q. Sir, you've . . .

A. That's too bad then, because . . .

Q. . . what is your answer to that?

A. What?

Q. Sir, you just asked a question. What is your answer to that?

A. What is my answer to this?

Q. If it is or not?

A. Well, my answer is that it probably wasn't too much different from the press rushing in to print what the Pentagon Papers, which were stolen — and they were classified and it was against the law. Now I want the Justice Department to find out if anybody did anything that broke the law.

Papers Investigation

Q. Mr. President, to get back to the case of the Carter briefing papers — you said that you wanted the Justice Department to monitor this case. Does monitor mean that they're going to do their own investigation of it? And also, since these serious questions are being raised about people who now hold senior positions in your Administration, do you think it would be appropriate to appoint a special prosecutor rather than having your own Justice Department look into the matter?

A. That would be up to the Attorney General, with regard to appointing a special investigator. But all of my people who had any knowledge at all of this have been told that they are available to the Justice Department and I told the Justice Department they're all available for any questioning they want to do.

Q. Does this mean that the Justice Department is conducting an investigation?

A. Yes, I've called it monitoring, but that's what it amounts to. I've said to find out if there was any wrongdoing and take action. Yes?

EXCERPTED